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# **Into their land and labours. A comparative and global analysis of trajectories of peasant transformation**

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# **Into their land and labours. A comparative and global analysis of trajectories of peasant transformation.**

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## **Abstract**

*The fate of rural societies in the past and today cannot be understood in a singular manner. Peasantries across the world have followed different trajectories of change and have developed divergent repertoires of accommodation, adaptation and resistance. Understanding these multiple trajectories requires new historical knowledge about the role of peasantries within long-term and worldwide economic and social transformations. This paper aims to make sense of this diversity from a comparative, integrated, and systemic approach. The paper is structured around the notions of peasant work, peasant frontiers, peasant communities and peasant regimes. These concepts figure as key analytical tools in an innovative research framework to analyze the paths of peasant transformation in modern world history beyond idealization and teleologization.*

**Key words:** Peasants, Land, Labour, Capitalism, World History

# 1 Introduction: Peasants, nature, land and labour

The peasant is still with us. The survival and persistence of peasantries in a globalising and ever more commodified world has been puzzling social scientists for a long time. Time and again, the demise of peasants was announced by intellectuals, capitalists, reformers and development planners alike.<sup>1</sup> The very notion of peasants and peasantries confronts us with the flaws of traditional/orthodox economic development theories. The mainstream image of the fate of peasants and peasantries is based on the standard story of the much praised English road to capitalist agriculture, and the concurrent disintegration of peasant societies. Recent history has shown that the English and European experiences of the dissolution of peasant societies within the context of expanding industrial and welfare economies, is not and cannot be a general example for the rest of the world. When we look beyond the old premises of westernised development, we see a very different picture. It is a picture of vast family-based rural and agricultural economies in which diversified production chains and multiple strategies of risk minimization are pooled together with locally and regionally anchored income and exchange systems (see amongst others Altieri and Nicholls 2005; McMichael 2008; Van der Ploeg 2010, 1-30).

The fate of rural societies in the past and today cannot be understood in a singular manner. Understanding multiple trajectories of peasant change requires new historical knowledge about the role of peasantries within long-term and worldwide economic and social transformations. Peasantries across the world have followed different trajectories of change and have developed divergent repertoires of accommodation, adaptation and resistance. The expansion of civilizations, states and global capitalism triggered different paths of peasant transformation, different processes of peasantization, de-peasantization and re-peasantization. This paper aims to make sense of this diversity in a comparative, interconnected and global perspective. We argue that peasant change in a world-historical perspective has to be understood from a combined frontier and community perspective. Throughout history peasantries -peasant worlds and peasant work- have been frontiers as processes of change and communities as spaces of redefinition. We address this question in four steps by proposing four interrelated analytical concepts. Peasant worlds are shaped by *peasant work*, as a manifestation of specific labour/land/nature relations. *Peasant frontiers* map the processes of incorporation, adaptation and opposition and explain how peasantries exist through these frontiers. *Peasant communities* are the central space for organization, self-determination, negotiation and resistance. They are also the gateway to larger and incorporative systems and the locus of the 'peasant question'. *Peasant regimes* situate and explain social change, trajectories of transformation in peasant work, peasant frontiers and peasant communities in a broad time/space context.

In this paper, these four analytical tools build up a more profound and encompassing framework which we believe to be essential in analysing the paths of peasant transformation in modern world history beyond idealization and teleologization. This framework proposes a threefold integrated, comparative and systemic research strategy to analyse the diverse, long-term and often interconnected process of peasant transformation and capitalist expansion. In enabling the study of peasant regimes through three interrelated approaches a genealogy can be generated. Genealogies of peasant transformation provide in an innovative method to research, understand and explain the divergent strategies that peasant populations have

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in his acclaimed book *The Age of Extremes*, Eric Hobsbawm wrote that 'the most dramatic and far-reaching social change of the second half of this century, and the one which cuts us off for ever from the world of the past, is the death of the peasantry' (Hobsbawm 1994, 289).

developed to defend and secure access to their essential means of production, nature, land and labour throughout world history.

The presented framework has been constructed in the course of a collaborative research project in which the diversity and parallels of trajectories of rural change in different world regions were brought into dialogue through a global and comparative analysis (Vanhaute, E., Cottyn, H. and Y. Wang 2015 and forthcoming). In this paper this framework will be discussed by examining existing scholarship and conceptualizations emanating from the fields of World History, Agrarian Studies and Social Sciences for each of its four key analytical concepts successively.

## **2 Peasant work: understanding peasant worlds**

Peasants are workers of the land. They live in rural, agricultural households and have direct access to the land they work, either as common users, tenants or smallholders. They are organized in family bonds, village communities and social groups that we call peasantries. These bonds pool different forms of income and meet a major portion of their subsistence needs via networks of production, exchange, credit and protection. Most of the time, peasantries are ruled by other social groups that extract a surplus either via rents, market transfers or through control of public power (taxation). Key terms include (a degree of) household and local autonomy, direct access to land and labour resources, flexible strategies of income-pooling, household-based village structures, and surplus extraction outside local control, as in Eric Wolf's 'fund of rent' that distinguishes the peasant from the 'primitive cultivator' (Wolf 1966; Edelman 2013, 2). Differences between peasants, market-driven farmers and industrial or entrepreneurial farming must be understood on a continuum, with land, household labour and the local community as discriminating variables (compare Van der Ploeg 2008, XIV).

Peasantries have been the single most important social group in world history since the Neolithic Revolution. All successful cultures and civilisations, excluding the few nomadic empires, were based on extensive peasant economies comprising 90 per cent or more of the population. Today, about 35 per cent of the world's population is economically dependent on agricultural production; of this more than 95 per cent are smallholders in the Global South. Although in sharp decline in the last century - around 1950 two thirds of the world's population was engaged in agriculture - the absolute numbers have never been so high. About 2.5 billion people (the total world population in 1950) eke out a living from predominantly peasant-based agriculture. Today the world has more than 570 million agricultural farms, 85 per cent of them family holdings cultivating less than two hectares. It is generally agreed that smallholders still provide for the majority of the world's food supply. In some Asian and sub-Saharan regions this amounts to 70 per cent and more (See FAOSTAT; GRAIN 2014).

The minimum social conditions of farming include access to land, labour, tools and seeds. Historically, the principal social units through which the means of farming have been secured are the rural household and the village household system, both varying greatly in size, composition and social relations through time. For a long time intellectuals aimed to describe and understand the 'distinctness' of the peasantry, to explore the 'essence' of the peasant, the 'countryman working on the land' and 'member of the class of farm labourers and small farmers' (Oxford Advanced Learned Dictionary). Disdain toward the 'louts and oafs' has been part of the discourse of the wealthy, the powerful and the literate in the West for a long time. The dualistic and biased images of rural versus non-rural worlds can be traced back to

the origin of the concepts of pagensis/paysan(ne)/paisano(a)/peasant, meaning from the pays, the countryside. In the Anglo-Saxon version, peasant continues to keep its narrow meaning, basically pointing at the eras of so-called feudalism and referring to social groups from the (far away) past. Even in its broadest usage, such as campesino(a) in Latin America, peasants have been viewed as remnants of the past (Freedman 1999; Desmarais 2007, 195-8). In nineteenth and twentieth century modernization thinking, the peasant as a kind of archetypical rural producer represented the starting point on the axis of evolution: the traditional community and the opposite of modernity. Western-based historiography has long developed and described the 'anti-modern' model of a 'familistic' (family-based) society as a relatively undifferentiated economy of family farms and rural crafts and services, structured by internal agencies such as family, kinship and village.

In the 1960s and 1970s the rediscovery of the works of the Russian agrarian economist and rural sociologist Alexander V. Chayanov (1888-1937) triggered a new wave of peasant studies and a renewed debate about the nature of peasant societies. The rural anthropologist Eric Wolf and rural sociologist Theodor Shanin, amongst others, moved this debate beyond a-historical and dichotomist representations (Wolf 1966; Shanin 1980, 89-104, 1987). The question is not whether peasants are naturally conservative, values-rational, safety-oriented investors in their land and labour or whether they tend to be risk-taking, market-oriented maximizers. They were and are both. They are 'rural cultivators whose surpluses are transferred to a dominant group of rulers that uses the surpluses both to underwrite its own standard of living and to distribute the remainder to groups in society that do not farm but must be fed for their specific goods and services in return' (Wolf 1966, 3-4). That is why peasants only exist within a social formation (peasantries) and within a class relationship (the external subordination to lords, government/state authorities, and regional or international markets which involve surplus extraction and social differentiation).

Peasantries make societies, societies make peasantries. Surplus production from the land is a precondition for large-scale societal change. Societal change is necessary to group the agricultural producers into peasantries. Agricultural-based economic systems facilitate vaster communal units and extended village networks. This provokes profound changes in the structure of social relations, population growth and village and supra-village institutions. The spread of agricultural village societies as the main food system takes millennia. By 5000 BCE much of the world's population lived by farming; by 3000 BCE the first agricultural-based empires emerged. By then peasant economies had become sufficiently advanced and in some regions they supported more complex, urban-based societies and more complex and differentiated trade networks (Bellwood 2005; Mazoyer and Roudart 2006).

Agrarian civilizations created a wide variety of foundational myths about the invention, or more aptly, 'the gift' of herding and farming, about the conflicts between agriculture/culture and nature, and about the benevolence of the gods to watch over earth's fertility and nature's gifts. The Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh recounts the battle between the old and the new ways of life, between nature and culture. The story conveys a message about the advantages and disadvantages of the new agrarian civilization. Gilgamesh symbolizes culture, as well as power, authority and delusions of grandeur. The new elites bring glory to Uruk and Sumer, yet simultaneously they make old family and societal relations subordinate to a new social hierarchy. The Middle Eastern Old Testament recounts the shift towards farming and herding, represented by the brothers Cain and Abel. After the fratricide, humanity is condemned to live the hard, laborious farmer's life: 'By the sweat of your face / you shall eat bread / till you return to the ground / for out of it you were taken' (Book of Genesis 3:19). Shennong, the

mythical Chinese Emperor of the Five Grains, brings the wisdom of farming. The Greek Olympian goddess Demeter turns the earth with the plough and gives corn and crops to bless the land. The Inca and Yoruba fertility deities Pachamama and Oko preside over planting and harvesting (Leeming 2005).

Civilizations do not simply rely on agricultural producers, they also organize, dominate and exploit them. Civilization equals complexity, sophistication, development, and grand culture. For peasants, it mostly equals dominion. Sometimes formally free, mostly bound to the soil by their masters, they are almost always the lowest class or caste, and women the lowest status among farmers. Peasant's history is the history of the struggle over the fruits of their labour. Social relations in agricultural societies are built on the returns of the land to support and reproduce institutions and norms that define new rules of ownership, inheritance, transmission and control. Peasants gain a substantial part of their income from direct access to products resulting from input of their labour on the land, any loss implies a notable decline in their living standards. Peasantries not only feed civilizations, empires, states and economies, they support their ecological and social resilience and fuel their expansion as 'reservoirs of socialized natures' (Moore 2010a, 409). They are their socio-ecological frontiers. Farming societies develop a new, more intrusive and aggressive attitude to the resources of nature, land and labour. The expansion of plant and animal husbandry presumes a more radical exploitation of diverse ecosystems and the development of new tools, new modes of clearing and renewing fertility, and new modes of cultivation and animal breeding. These have an increasing impact on labour-nature relations, in the first place resulting in massive worldwide deforestation. The gradual incorporation of external 'free' goods discloses new supplies of labour, land and nature, which are mobilized in new production processes (Moore 2010b, 245; Barbier 2011, 7).

Like every social formation, peasantries develop as sets of social relationships. The households are basic economic units and the gateway to the wider world. They pursue an agricultural livelihood by combining subsistence and commodity production through direct access to nature, land, labour and commodities. Together with extended families, kinship and village societies they are the vital nodes of production, consumption, reproduction, socialization, welfare, credit and risk-spreading. A peasant's world is built on his work. Work includes any human effort adding use value to goods and services. In the last three centuries, the use value of work has been increasingly defined in purely economic terms, or in terms of economic independence. Economic activities figuring in multiform and extended subsistence networks are increasingly labelled as worthless or as forms of idleness (Lis and Soly 2012, 3, 569).

Differentiation between work and non-work is an invention of industrial society, together with increasing emphasis on different social meanings of work and on different gender roles. This fixation has seriously affected our view on peasant worlds and peasant work. The economic roles that different household and community members take on are neither fixed nor permanent. They signify a transient social relationship, one that can be replaced rather quickly by other sources of labour and income. That is why the dividing lines between paid and non-paid work, between workers in the rural and non-rural worlds, between visible (registered) and hidden labour, between free and unfree labour are fuzzy at best (Van der Linden 2012, 57-76).

Peasant's labour can only be understood in more generic terms, within the dialectics between humans and nature. To use the famous words of Marx: 'labour is, in the first place, a process



in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature (...) By this acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature' (Marx 1887 [1867], 127). Through these sets of relations work/nature is transformed into value, which may be appropriated via coercive (non-economic) means, or capitalized as in commodified labour-power (Moore 2015, 3). In the end, the valorization of labour-power always turns on the appropriation of unpaid work/energy from nature, including human/peasant work.

In the remainder of this paper we disentangle and understand peasantries -peasant work and peasant worlds- as world-historical processes. The concept of peasant frontiers interrogates processes of incorporation, adaptation and opposition. Frontiers redefine the socio-ecological relations between humans and nature and are the sites of appropriation of new supplies of nature, land and labour. Frontiers also create zones of negotiation, alliance and resistance, and are vital nodes of social change. The central space for organization, self-determination, negotiation and resistance are peasant communities. At the same time, they are gateways to larger and incorporative systems. The 'peasant question' queries the role and fate of peasantries within the processes of societal transition. Frontiers and communities refer to the multileveled scales of interaction and change within a comparative, historical and global context.

Peasantries make their own worlds, but they do not make them under self-controlled and self-selected circumstances. The incorporation and recreation of peasantries in larger economies turns them into part-time producers of revenues, manpower and commodities. This process of partial incorporation shapes at the same time new spaces or arenas in which they can redefine and recreate their work and worlds. These dialectics between integration and independence have created a large variety of land tenure systems and labour regimes, and differential forms of access to nature, land, labour and exchange and credit networks (Owen 2005, 368-85; Bernstein 2003, 10, 2010, 110-2). In order to make sense of social change in a broad time/space span, we frame social realities in a set of evolving and changing regimes. The concept of peasant regime is a tool to contextualize how peasantries in a certain time/space are (internally) organized and (externally) embedded, and how these social fixes change over time.

### **3 Peasant frontiers: understanding peasant incorporation**

Peasantries are vital frontiers of civilizations, empires and globalizing capitalism. Edward Barbier defines frontier expansion or frontier-based development as 'exploiting or converting new sources of relatively abundant resources for production purposes' (Barbier 2011, 7). Frontiers are constantly shifting processes of contact between different spaces and social systems. They materialize in contact zones; they disappear when the interaction ends or when one system is fully incorporated into another system.<sup>2</sup> Frontier expansion nourishes social systems; it provides new sources of nature, land and labour, creating new supplies, reducing production costs and increasing profitability. Jason Moore defines these frontiers not as fixed

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<sup>2</sup> Since this perspective is, to a large extent, constructed within a world-systems framework, we coin it a 'world-systems frontier analysis'. As its *raison d'être*, a frontier perspective explores the implications of the unequal exchange that binds a societal system for groups who live at, on or even beyond the periphery. Moving beyond deterministic or dichotomist notions of how global and local processes interact, it seeks to grasp the unevenness of incorporation processes (Cottyn forthcoming).

geographical places, but as socio-ecological relations ‘that unleash a new stream of nature’s bounty to capital: cheap food, cheap energy, cheap raw materials, and cheap labour’ (Moore 2015, 245). They generate shifting sets of ‘localized’ activities to secure access to labour and land for ‘globalized’ commodity production (primarily agricultural, forest and mining goods). Frontiers are thus ‘concerned with the creation, transformation and elimination of boundary zones’ (Hall 2012, 51). The sites where this happens become frontier zones. Frontiers are never fixed, they are inherently unstable. They challenge the limits of social, economic and ecological sustainability, resulting in the apparent need to be continually shifting in time and space.

The incorporation of rural zones and the creation of new peasantries have been central to the expansion of village societies, early states, agrarian (tributary) empires, and global (colonial, imperialist and neo-liberal) capitalism. In most societal settings, these zones are integrated as loci of appropriation of the produce of land and labour and as peripheral spaces of production, exploitation and recreation. Peasantries are thus primary frontiers in societal expansion. Their partial incorporation as producers of new surpluses instigates mixed, complex and often opposing processes of restructuring, generating a multiplicity of frontier zones.

Capitalist incorporation and expansion is fuelled by the opening of the ‘Great Frontier’, a metaphor for an intensifying and interconnected worldwide set of shifting frontiers. Global capitalist expansion since the long sixteenth century demands a drastic increase in the world-ecological surplus. This instigates an intensifying process of exhaustion of both land and labour, and the appropriation of new frontiers of what Jason Moore coins ‘uncapitalized’ nature. The mass of unpaid work/nature rises relative to the mass of accumulated capital; new frontiers are opened, their ‘free gifts’ identified, mapped, secured and appropriated (Moore 2015, 20-1). This massive process of creating new commodity frontiers and the gradual commodification of the global countryside has opened up an unseen bounty of nature, land and labour’s rewards, fuelling globalizing capitalism.

Frontiers can be external and internal. Both (external) incorporation and (internal) differentiation create frontiers, such as the delineations between old and new social groups and the extent to which they are included or excluded. Frontier zones do not vanish after incorporation; they are permanently replicated by converging and dialectical processes of homogenization (the reduction of frontiers) and heterogenization (the creation of new frontiers) (Vanhaute 2012a, 157-9).<sup>3</sup> New forms of colonization and imperialism, starting in the sixteenth century, instigated a huge expansion and shift of peripheral frontier zones. This expansion connects large rural populations to the European world-economy and creates spaces for new forms of production, discourse, identity and resistance. Along the margins of social and economic systems, hybrid cultures originate; social groups and social zones are incorporated or excluded. Rather than lines, frontiers must be envisioned as historical and dynamic processes of both incorporation and differentiation that create and reorganize spatial settings or frontier zones. The frontier perspective grasps the imbalances of incorporation processes, emphasizing the role of the margins and friction zones.

Due to the incomplete nature of incorporation, frontier zones are the prime locus of negotiation processes about socio-economic commodification and socio-cultural assimilation

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<sup>3</sup> Delario Lindsey (2012, 351) coins the term ‘systemic disincorporation’ to describe a particular form of spatial inequality and disconnection associated with slum areas in contemporary metropolitan cities.

(Galaty 2010, 14). This insight has created a proliferation of frontier-related concepts, moving it from the edges to the centre of 'modernity'.<sup>4</sup> Walter Mignolo, for example, developed the concept of 'colonial difference' as a conflict of types of knowledge and structures of power.<sup>5</sup> These interpretations have revealed frontiers as the locus of both contestation (war, resistance, lawsuits, intolerance, plunder, extraction, sabotage, ecological degradation, segregation) and alliance (biological symbiosis, marriage, economic partnership, political bonds and treaties, celebration, conversion, gifts). Frontiers and frontier zones can be differentiated on the basis of intensity (open-closed, informal-formal), location (on the edge of a world-system or within the system) and the links and transfers that connect them to the system (bulk goods, luxury goods, political authority, military power, labour, information, etc.). Through their interactions with inclusive systems (states, civilizations, economies) peasantries constitute a social frontier of 'incomplete' incorporation or, borrowing the concept of Kardulias, of 'negotiated peripheralities', spaces of exploitation, negotiation and opportunities.<sup>6</sup>

#### **4 Peasant communities: understanding the peasant question**

Agrarian change refers to historical and interrelated processes of absorption of agrarian-rural worlds within wider geographies and different sectors, and to the acts of negotiation, adaptation and resistance of agrarian-rural peoples. We call this the peasant question (McMichael 2006, 407-18; Araghi 1999, 145-60). In capitalism these confrontations are intensified by processes of commodification, 'through which the elements of production and social reproduction are produced for, and obtained from, market exchange and subjected to its disciplines and compulsions' (Bernstein 2010, 102). These processes are never absolute or complete. Capitalism's tendency towards generalized commodity production has created immense disparities on a global level; uneven or semi-commodification has always been at the heart of historical capitalism (Wallerstein 1995, 13-43). For example, the densely populated and highly urbanized regions around the North Sea Basin initiated strongly commercialized agriculture, an interregional and intercontinental trade system and intensive industrial production starting in the twelfth century. This triggered transformations in surrounding rural societies, thereby generating strong regional differentiation.

Capitalist agricultural zones, dominated by commercial farms and wage labour, developed in regions bordering the North Sea. These zones are bound by peasant societies. Some combined small-scale family farming with an expanding proto-industry, thus creating export commodity production. Further, but still integrated in a regional division of labour, we find

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<sup>4</sup> Examples are Beltrán's 'regions of refuge' (1991), the 'middle ground' conceptualized by Richard White (1991), Ferguson and Whitehead's 'tribal zone' (1992), the 'frontiers and frontier zones' of Hall (1997, 2000, 2001, 2009, 2012), Guy and Sheridan's 'contested ground' (1998), the 'hidden frontiers' of Cole and Wolf (1999), the 'spaces in between' and 'colonial difference' of Mignolo (2000), the 'contested peripheries' of Cline (2000), the 'diachronic frontiers' of Schon and Galaty (2007), 'negotiated peripherality' of Kardulias (2007) and Scott's plea for 'Zomia studies' (2009).

<sup>5</sup> As the system expands, Mignolo explains, the local histories of subaltern groups become structured by the single logic of 'global designs', that is, to reinforce the coherence and expansive course of the modern world-system (Mignolo 2000, 43). This is closely related to the 'coloniality of power', defined as a power-binding medium to channel knowledge production that operates in a space structured by coloniality and modernity, which are each other's reverse (Mignolo 2000, 16-17).

<sup>6</sup> Kardulias tested 'negotiated peripherality' in two settings: ancient Cyprus and contact-era North America. The concept refers to 'the willingness and ability of individuals in peripheries to determine the conditions under which they will engage in trade, ceremonial exchange, intermarriage, adoption of outside religious and political ideologies, etc. with representatives of expanding states' (Kardulias 2007, 55).

more autarchic peasant zones with a significant labour surplus (Van Bavel and Hoyle 2010; Vanhaute, Devos and Lambrechts 2011; Brenner 2001, 1-2). The first global food regime arose in the 1870s. The expansion of grain and meat production in settler economies and the expansion of tropical export crops in colonial Asia and Africa coincided with massive de-agrarianization and de-peasantization and more diversified, capital-intensive farming in Europe (Friedmann 2004).

The globalization of farming and food consumption in the twentieth century also had highly differential impacts on societies in the North and South, shaped by new international divisions of labour and trade in agricultural commodities. The commodification and marginalization of peasant subsistence in the South coincided with the expansion of export crops like coffee, cocoa, tea, sugar, cotton and palm oil, the promotion of high-value commodities like horticultural products and the expansion of large-scale production of soy, sugar and grains. The working poor of the South are increasingly forced to pursue their reproduction through insecure and oppressive wage employment and/or a range of precarious small scale and 'informal economy' survival activities, including marginal farming. Moreover, livelihoods are pursued across different spaces of the social division of labour: urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural, wage employment and marginal self-employment (Bernstein 2010, 87 and 111).

What is often regarded as historical processes of de-peasantization is, in essence, part of more diversified labour and income strategies of the peasantry. Due to intensifying economic and social uprooting, these survival strategies become more important than ever for an important portion of the world's population. Some authors have coined these revived multi-level strategies of survival, autonomy and resistance a recreation of peasant strategies. The peasant question has been raised to query the role and fate of peasantries within the process of capitalist transition. It entails essentially political questions that 'reflect the very structure of the society', although 'it was a question posed *about* the peasantry, not necessarily *of* or *by* them' (Roseberry 1993, 321-3).

In a non-Western and global context, this socio-economic peasant question (peasantry as a class) becomes complexly entangled with the socio-cultural indigenous question (indigeneness as a cultural identity). The labels 'peasant' and 'indigenous' refer to a set of claims that may coincide or overlap with various other identities (gender, class, linguistic, national). However, peasant and indigenous identities have increasingly become overlapping and reinforcing categories of 'peripherality', an umbrella stigma of the poor and the marginalized in today's globalizing world. In turn, these global processes generate new forms of 'peripheral consciousness' (Devés-Valdés 2012, 466, 469-74). The locality and the community are reinforced; sometimes they are reinvented as a basic framework for both peasant and indigenous identities. Battles related to the contested peasant and indigenous claims to land, territory and resources, which usually have a communal rather than an individual nature, are a central instigator. For peasantries, land has been and still is the main basis of negotiation and interaction with other sectors of society because its use has direct implications for their exchange relations (products derived from that land) and for their power relations (the regulation of access to the land) (Wallerstein 2012, 6). The communal level is the central space for self-determination, negotiation and resistance. This combination of autonomy and intermediation converts 'the communal' into a crucial gateway to different and independent 'local histories' and to interaction within larger and incorporative systems (Fenelon and Hall 2009; Mignolo 2011).

Communities facilitate the organization, procurement and defence of common goals, but this implies considerable costs (Mayer 2002, 41). Hence, communal structures show complex patterns and internal conflicts that make community life 'complex, conflictive, messy, and contradictory, rather like people's lives anywhere else in this world' (Canessa 2012, 11). The persistence of community systems supports households to intervene in the public sphere in the form of reciprocal mechanisms, authoritative bodies and collective actions. These regulatory structures determine and allocate rights among community members; 'there are no commons without communities within which the modalities of access to common resources are negotiated, [...] there is no enclosure of commons without at the same time the destruction and fragmentation of communities. Common resources and empowered communities are two sides of the same coin' (De Angelis 2009).

The combination of safeguarding a minimum of autonomous control over vital resources and securing a minimum of involvement in broader socio-political structures accounts for the peasant communities' multifaceted, apparently contradictory, but above all alert attitude towards incorporation processes. On the one hand, the resistant stance adopted by peasants is based on an attempt to defend a particular method of regulating access to livelihood resources. On the other hand, these groups adopt a pragmatic stance and often adapt or even assimilate to new and incorporating entities. This is reflected in the development of market and trade relations as well as in legal-political struggles. Rather than attesting to the group's openness to or craving for capitalist incorporation, this claim to participation should be assessed in relation to the survival guarantees that peasants can obtain from their 'extractors', usually in exchange for taxation and surplus production.

Resistance is seldom simply 'opposition'; it is diverse in motivation, strategy and representation. This points to the peasant/indigenous communities' frontier position from where they can tap into different spheres in order to promote alternatives. So-called peasant or indigenous resistance includes diverse response options sprouting from this 'subversive complicity' (Grosfoguel 2008, 103; Vanhaute 2014, 114-29). They range from overt to covert, material to cosmologic, institutionalized to symbolic, individual to collective strategies; peasant resistance should be addressed as a nuanced continuum.<sup>7</sup>

## **5 Peasant regimes: understanding peasant change**

Agrarian or peasant change has often been framed in dichotomous and predominantly a-historical models. Market versus non-market relations, economic versus cultural forms of exchange, modern versus traditional societal arrangements; a long tradition of rural sociology is grafted upon these dichotomies. Concepts such as traditional, survival, subsistence or informal economies have not been very helpful to understand social change in a world-historical context. They freeze peasant's history in dualistic frames and fail to grasp the dynamics and change within peasant societies. When survival and subsistence refer to supporting oneself at not much more than a bare-bone level with little or no surpluses, peasant economies do not fit these typologies. On the contrary, they are rooted in a wide variety of reciprocal exchanges: redistributions that integrate different spaces in networks of mutual obligations, regional and extra-regional market transactions, and public retributions. Debates about the informal economy are rooted in contemporary and normative concerns about a lack of legally regulated labour relations, state enforced social protection mechanisms

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<sup>7</sup> A key contribution to this nuance has been Scott's assessment of resistance in its covert or 'everyday' disguise (See amongst others Scott 1985, 2009).

and decent remuneration systems in broad parts of the global labour force, including rural worlds (Centeno and Portes 2006, 27-9). This begs the question of the pertinence of this conceptualization in both a historical context and in widely diverging socio-political frameworks. Understood as a world-historical process, informalization can refer to tides or waves of the creation, extension, and replenishment of casual and non-proletarian labour in global capitalism. Since this includes the unmaking of more regulated labour relations to reduce labour costs, it often equals ruralization or peasantization processes (Tabak 2000, 1-5).

Ultimately, the peasantry has often been considered a class whose significance necessarily diminishes with the further development of capitalism. For more than a century, debates about this agrarian question have been dominated by two groups of protagonists (Araghi 1995). On the one hand, the ‘disappearance thesis’ defends that the inevitable expansion of capitalism will lead to the extermination of the peasantry. Following Lenin and Kautsky, the former, more or less undifferentiated class of peasants is transformed into new, distinct groups: capital owners (capitalist farmers) and wage labourers. On the other hand, advocates of the ‘permanence thesis’ argue that, according to Chayanov’s peasant mode of production, peasant societies have a distinct development logic that supports the survival of the peasantry within capitalism. A central question behind this debate is if and how peasants who formed the vast majority of the population in former agrarian societies, thereby sustaining and reproducing both themselves and the dominant classes and institutions, can still be perceived as a social group within the contemporary globalizing and de-ruralizing world. Do peasantries still constitute a general (and generic) social group, determined by a set of distinct qualities, from household subsistence and village solidarity to social/ecological harmony, as opposed to other social groups such as rural proletarians and market-oriented farmers (Bernstein 2003, 10, 2010, 110-2)? The search for ‘peasant essentialism’ has been apparent in both historical (peasants as pre-capitalist survivors) and contemporary (agrarian populism) analyses. Post-modern and globalization studies have often amplified the thesis of ‘the end of peasantries’ while sometimes dismissing the concept of the peasant altogether.

Both the teleological (disappearance as social group) and the essentialist (survival of a ‘sui generis’ group) views have been suffering from a-historical and often functionalistic presumptions (Owen 2005, 368-85). Historically, the processes of peasant transformation have neither been unilinear nor have they been taken fixed forms of social differentiation over time and space. In this sense, peasantry is an open process that interacts within multiple forms and scales of conflict and interaction and leaves room for different levels of autonomy. The concepts of peasantization and de-peasantization refer to the ongoing processes of creation, decline, adaptation and resistance. Throughout history, peasantries have been the historical outcome of labour and income processes that are constantly adjusting to surrounding conditions, such as market fluctuations, state control, technical innovations, demographic trends, and environmental changes. Rural populations become peasants by degree and relinquish their peasant status gradually over time (Bryceson, Kay and Mooij 2000). However, the combined processes of overburdening, restricting and reducing peasant spaces have considerably weakened their material basis in the last few centuries.

The concept of de-peasantization refers to the multi-layered process of erosion of an agrarian way of life. It is increasingly difficult to combine subsistence and commodity agricultural production with an internal social organization based on family labour and village community settlement (Bryceson 1999, 175). This has triggered a further diversification of rural coping mechanisms, including petty commodity production, rural wage labour, seasonal migration,

subcontracting to national and multinational corporations, self-employment, remittances, and transregional and transnational income transfers. The concept of de-peasantization often hides more diversified and more precarious labour and income strategies that have been developed by the peasantry. Moreover, processes of de-agrarianization in the core zones often coincide with the creation of new peasantries in the peripheries. For example, nineteenth century colonialism in India and twentieth century colonialism in Africa engendered processes of systemic peasantization that facilitated the colonial governments agricultural commodity export goals. Spurred by colonial taxation, African agrarian producers increasingly produced agricultural commodities in conjunction with their subsistence production, or alternatively exported male labour on the basis of circular migration. Recent forces of de-agrarianization are triggered by the enforcement of neo-liberal policies and Structural Adjustment Plans. In many peripheries, vulnerability has switched from a temporary to a structural state of being. This is countered by the intensification of old and the introduction of new forms of livelihood diversification such as taking up non-farm activities and relying on non-farm income transfers (Ellis 2006, 393).

Peasant change has often been understood from a post-hoc perspective. It gets its meaning from the outcomes that we measure. Agrarian and farming systems are an influential ordering tool in agricultural and rural history. Research concentrates on the organization, functioning and outcomes of subsequent systems, with a strong focus on ecology, technology and farming practices. This often results in models of evolution, classification and differentiation of agrarian systems in a given region or within the world (See Mazoyer and Roudart 2006, 21-23; Robinson 2004, 1-29; Tauger 2010, 2-3). Social-ecological agrosystems describe rural production networks as sets of region-specific social power relations shaping the economic reproduction of a given geographical area. They are the theoretical expression of historically constituted and geographically localized types of agriculture and ecological and social reproduction/production systems (Thoen 2004, 47-66; Landsteiner and Langthaler 2010). In a global-comparative context, these typologies are frequently based on Eurocentric models and understood in priori historical sequences. This risks creating new myths underpinning existing power relations and legitimizing discourses both in academic knowledge and in applied fields such as development work (Widgren forthcoming). Bottom-up research shows that agrarian and peasant regimes cannot be predicted from environmental, demographic or evolutionary contexts.

In order to make sense of social change in a broad time/space span, we frame social realities into a genealogy of evolving and changing peasant regimes.<sup>8</sup> Peasant regimes are a tool to contextualize and understand how peasantries in a certain time/space are (internally) organized and (externally) embedded. Each regime embodies an institutionalization of economic, social, political, cultural and ecological forces that structure internal and external peasant relations. They organize forms and relations of production, reproduction, exchange and extraction. They define how these relations are ordered and represented (or legitimized) via structures of power and forms of hegemony. Regimes are social space/time fixes: methodological tools to specify changing relations between 'world ordering' and peasantries. A genealogy of peasant regimes claims that episodes of restructuring and transition are bounded by more stable periods of regulation and organization, albeit in a non-determined

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<sup>8</sup> We borrow the concept of genealogy from Michel Foucault 'Genealogy ... rejects the meta-historical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies (...) Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity (...) Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people.' (1980, 140 and 146).

way.<sup>9</sup> The genealogy of societal regimes provides a genuine, global comparative-historical lens to look at the social, economic, political and ecological relations of agrarian empires and global capitalism.<sup>10</sup> It aims at a non-hierarchical, non-evolutionary and non-deterministic interpretation of global social change.

## **6 Trajectories of peasant transformation: A THREEFOLD STRATEGY**

The incorporation and redefinition of rural zones has continuously redefined and recreated peasant regimes. Three interlocking dimensions constitute the trajectories of peasant transformation: the constitution and reconstitution of peasant societies (household and kinship relations, village systems, regional networks), their integration within wider societal structures (trade and commerce networks, fiscal systems, power and property relations), and the changing connections between local, regional and global processes. To understand this interaction, we have to disentangle the interconnection between the social power relations within, between and above local communities, and the modes of access to nature, land and labour resources. Land and labour regimes regulate relations of property and tenure between owners of the land, users of the land and governors of the land; between landlords, peasants and governments. Property relations are tightly intertwined with social power relations; this reflects the capacity of one social group to dominate other groups. These social relations of power include the relationship between landlords and tenants, between owners and occupiers, between farmers and labourers, between owners and occupiers of land and governments, and between rural and non-rural interests. Property rights have been central to the emanation of social power relations within different types of peasant regimes (Van Bavel and Hoyle 2010; Curtis 2012). The outcome of the configuration of power relations, the social distribution of land and labour, have differed wildly over time and space.

Dynamic local communities generally support collective resource control and promote risk-avoiding strategies such as income pooling at the level of the household and village household system. They avoid increasing flows of surplus extraction, allow for a more egalitarian division of land, promote collective regulation of farming and herding, and stimulate collective use of capital goods and sustainable ecological management (Curtis 2012, 58). The expansion of the ‘Great Frontier’ requires a more direct intervention in peasant institutions and practices of allocation and use of land and labour (Barbier 2011, 418; Bernstein 2010, 43). This frontier-based development of new resources necessitates a permanent restructuring of peasant land and labour regimes, generating significant differences over space and time. In the peasant question, land and labour rights are the prime subject of expropriation and negotiation.

Societal expansion is primarily rooted in the redefinition of land relations. The expansion of global capitalism is the expression of a fundamental transformation of land rights.<sup>11</sup> While the forms that this transformation took were complex and varied across time and space, four central features can be distinguished: the transformation of a complex system of customary

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<sup>9</sup> ‘History is the concrete body of a development, with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells’ (Foucault 1980, 145).

<sup>10</sup> The regulation school studies the transformation of social relations in the context of changing regimes of accumulation: patterns in the way production, circulation, consumption and distribution organize and expand capital and stabilize the economy over time (McMichael 2013, 1-12; Boyer 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Two recent books that make a strong argument about the commodification of the global countryside as foundational for the expansion and success of historical capitalism are Sven Beckert’s *Empire of Cotton* (.2015, 83-97) and Andro Linklater’s *Owning the earth* (2013, 388).



rights to land usage and to legal and written titles to land ownership; the transformation of the concept of property from jurisdiction and ambiguously defined areas to concretely defined, and possibly enclosed, physical spaces; the rationalization of the use of such demarcated landed property as a form of capital; and increased privatization of the earth's surface through dispossession and displacement of peasants and indigenous populations (based on Araghi Karides 2012).

Regulations pertaining to land use have been a primary tool for opening access to labour and commodity production, albeit in very different ways. The most fundamental challenge to capitalist expansion has been communal ownership of resources because it denies the overarching dominance of private property rights (Hall and Fenelon 2008, 6-7). The shared land question is a prime conflict zone for the simultaneous adoption of strategies of adaptation/assimilation and strategies of resistance. Grafted on the land question are negotiations pertaining to access to labour, market and trade relations and legal-political integration. Bottom-up claims to participation do not back an aim for fully-fledged incorporation. On the contrary, they are often part of the strategy of safeguarding some autonomous control over vital resources and securing some involvement in broader structures. The intensification of commodified land rights since 1850 has been fuelled by colonial (a massive land grab transforming communal and peasant land rights), developmental (state-sponsored collectivization schemes including expropriation and displacement), and neo-liberal (global enclosures, massive contraction of land rights and accelerated de-peasantisation on a world scale) globalisation projects (McMichael 2012; Araghi 2010). A global land grab, unprecedented since colonial times, is currently underway as states and speculative investors acquire millions of hectares of land through the purchase of land in the global South (Scoones et al. 2013).

Contrary to the trend of unification of land rights, capitalist expansion induced more varied labour regimes: systems of recruiting, organizing and reproducing labour. Most regimes combine subsistence with commodity production; fully proletarianized wage labour is still infrequent today (Wallerstein 1979, 283-93; Van der Linden 2008, 291-2). Labour systems include 'free' (wage, unbound) labour, forced labour (by tribute, taxation and forced labour service) and semi-proletarian labour (wage labour plus subsistence production). Surplus extraction from labour implies at least a partial separation from the means of production, either through extra-economic coercion or direct economic coercion ('the dull compulsion of economic forces') (Bernstein 2010, 52-55). Van der Linden stresses the centrality of coercion in the massive group of 'subaltern workers', including peasant populations. Every person whose labour power is sold or hired out to another person under economic or non-economic compulsion belongs to this class of subaltern workers, regardless of whether he or she is a free labourer or owns/controls part of the means of production (Van der Linden 2008, 33-5). Within the variety of labour regimes that exist, boundaries are flexible and sometimes vague. Moreover, individual relations are embedded in household-based and group-based networks. 'The partiality of wage labour' is especially clear from a household perspective since a large majority of households have never been solely dependent on wage labour income (Dunaway 2012; Smith and Wallerstein 1992). Non-wage labour has been an essential part of capitalist reproduction. It produces 'cheap labour', it creates part of the surplus, and it absorbs part of the costs (of care and reproduction). Processes of incorporation create dynamic frontier zones where new people are absorbed in the capitalist system. They develop strategies of adaptation, differentiation and resistance. Sometimes peasant agency creates relative prosperity; for example when they are able to mobilize land and labour for export commodity

production that can be integrated into subsistence farming (Bernstein 2010, 52; Hall 2012, 51; Vanhaute 2012b, 317-8).

The variety of land-labour relations reflects the frontier position and the communal base of peasant regimes. In general, peasant strategies related to work and income are geared towards the self-organization of systems of land-holding and labour organization. Which regimes existed? How were they affected by the intensifying trend of incorporation and commodification? Which differences can we discern over time and between regions? What is the impact of the expansion of new forms of agrarian civilizations and capitalist production? The strategy for researching this diverse, long-term and often interconnected process combines three interrelated approaches. Integrated research: incorporation, alienation, interaction, negotiation and resistance affect all aspects of peasant life, such as family, land, labour, capital, knowledge, production and reproduction. Comparative research: differences and similarities in trajectories of peasant change are analysed in a reciprocal and incorporating comparative framework, avoiding proto-typical blueprints and putting the comparisons within their world-historical coordinates. Systemic research: processes of change are part of systemic transformations on a regional and a global scale (Vanhaute 2015; McMichael 1990).

This integral, comparative, interconnected and systemic research frame focuses on the dynamics between social relations of power and social relations of property, and on the control of, access to and alienation from nature, land and labour in a long-term and global perspective. Non-capitalist societies include village societies, city-states and agrarian empires. They range from 7000 BCE (village societies), 3000 BCE (agrarian empires) to well into the second millennium CE. Early village societies, city-states, and agrarian-imperial expansion frame the first types of peasant regimes. Despite huge differences in time and space, these regimes are mostly defined by gradual peasant incorporation, indirect political control and coerced extraction of land and labour surpluses via taxes, tributes, rents and confiscations (see Renfrew and Bahn 2014; Smith 2011; Barker 2006; Bellwood 2005).

The invention of private property and the commodification of the countryside mark the beginning of capitalist expansion, which accelerated in the long sixteenth century. Within capitalism, peasant regimes are premised on new forms of enclosure of land and labour. Direct incorporation thoroughly alters ecological relations and changes the rules of the game. This results in a greater diversification of systems of access to nature, land and labour, of systems of production and reproduction, and of survival and coping mechanisms. Uneven incorporation and uneven commodification cause intensified social and spatial differentiation through divergent processes of de-peasantization and re-peasantization, and a concurrent diversification of peasant livelihood diversification (Vergara-Camus 2009, 378). Peasant regimes diversify according to their location and timing in the capitalist world-system. Examples include capitalist core zone expansion, capitalist settler zone expansion, capitalist plantation zone expansion, capitalist peasant zone expansion, and contemporary neo-liberal expansion. These regimes reflect divergent historical roads of peasant incorporation: core-making processes by decomposition (creating a system of market-oriented family farms; old core regions); core-making processes by settlement (creating a system of market-oriented family farms; new core regions, settler economies); periphery-making processes by alienation (creating a system of core-oriented plantation agriculture); periphery-making processes by

adaptation (creating a system of core-oriented peasant agriculture); and periphery-making processes by inheritance (incorporating 'independent' peasant agriculture; e.g. China).<sup>12</sup>

## **7 Final reflections: Into their land and labours**

Ever since early village systems, peasants have been a major social force in world history. Not only did they feed the world, they supported states, kingdoms and empires, they overthrew existing powers and changed the course of history, and they fuelled economic and social expansion. The peasant is a central actor in world history. From a community perspective we understand households and villages as the basic social units and gateways to the wider world. From a frontier perspective we understand rural communities as organized in response to the pressures of encroaching societal entities. They develop strategies for survival and resistance in response to the expanding impact of state powers, market relations, class struggles and ethno-cultural identity conflicts. Over time, the scales upon which these social power relations are expressed have not only been widening and multiplying, they have also become increasingly interdependent.

The 'long twentieth century' capitalist food regime expanded through successive waves of imperialist and neo-liberal intensification, globalising the North Sea geo-model of a core of capital intensive market production with peasant-based export cum survival zones at the edges. This restructuring and intensification of core-periphery relations created new divergences in the rural economy and in peasant societies. The disappearance of peasantries in Europe, the forced neutralization of rural societies in China, and the struggle to formulate new peasant responses to peripheral positions in Africa and Latin America are all part of the changing global geo-system in the early twenty-first century. This change is translated in intensifying and interconnected processes of de-peasantization and re-peasantization.

Over time, the combined process of overburdening, restricting and reducing peasant spaces has considerably weakened the material basis of peasant regimes. That is why the concept of de-peasantization has to be 'historicized' as a multi-layered process of erosion of an agrarian way of life. It reflects the increased difficulty of combining subsistence and commodity agricultural production with an internal social organization based on family labour and village community settlement. Due to the marginalization of a growing number of the world's population, mixed income and survival strategies have become more important than ever.

This century may witness a new turning point via a re-emergence of peasant-like survival systems. One of the signs that points towards this is the fact that farming is increasingly being restructured in a peasant-like way in many regions in response to the agrarian crisis of the last few decades (see e.g. Quinn-Thibodeau and Myers 2009). These regionally diversified processes have greatly strengthened global inequality. Contrary to the urbanized and semi-urbanized labour forces in the North, rural workers of the global South increasingly have to pursue their reproduction through insecure and oppressive wage employment and/or a range of precarious, small-scale and 'informal economy' survival activities, including small and marginal farming. Peasant livelihood strategies related to land and labour remain a central part of twenty-first century global capitalism.

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<sup>12</sup> The first four trajectories reflect the impact of direct incorporation/colonisation, the last one of indirect incorporation. Mirroring this schedule, Peter Taylor argues that within the expansion of a capitalist world-economy, and depending on time and place, processes of urbanization can be core-making or periphery-making (Taylor 2014, 39-54).

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